

The Six Realms

When we left the monkey, he was in the Hell Realm, trying to kick and claw and push his way through the walls of his house. The monkey's experiences in the Hell Realm are quite terrifying and horrific. He finds himself walking through gigantic fields of red-hot iron, or being chained and marked with black lines and cut apart, or roasting in hot iron cubicles, or boiling in large cauldrons. These and the other hallucinations of Hell are generated from an environment of claustrophobia and aggression. There is a feeling of being trapped in a small space with no air to breathe and no room in which to move about. Trapped as he is, the monkey not only tries to destroy the walls of his claustrophobic prison; he even attempts to kill himself in order to escape his excruciating and continuous pain. But he cannot really kill himself, and his suicide attempts only intensify his torture. The more the monkey struggles to destroy or control the walls, the more solid and oppressive they become, until at some point the intensity of the monkey's aggression wears out a bit and, instead of battling with the walls, he stops relating to them, stops communicating with them. He becomes paralyzed, frozen, remaining enveloped in pain without struggling to escape it. Here

he experiences the various tortures involving freezing and dwelling in harsh, barren, desolate areas.

However, eventually the monkey begins to become exhausted from his struggle. The intensity of the Hell Realm begins to diminish, the monkey begins to relax, and suddenly he sees the possibility of a more open, spacious way to be. He hungers for this new state, and this is the Realm of the Hungry Ghost or Preta Loka: the feeling of impoverishment and hunger for relief. In the Hell Realm he had been too busy struggling to even have time to consider the possibility of relief. Now he experiences great hunger for more pleasurable, spacious conditions and fantasizes numerous ways to satisfy his hunger. He may imagine that he sees far away from him some open space, but when he approaches it, he finds a vast terrifying desert. Or he may see in the distance a huge fruit tree, but as he goes closer to it, he discovers that it is barren or that someone is guarding it. Or the monkey may fly to a seemingly lush and fertile valley, only to find it filled with poisonous insects and the repelling smells of rotting vegetation. In each of his fantasies he glimpses the possibility of satisfaction, reaches out for it, and is quickly disappointed. Each time he seems about to achieve pleasure, he is rudely awakened from his idyllic dream; but his hunger is so demanding that he is not daunted and so continues to constantly churn out fantasies of future satisfaction. The pain of disappointment involves the monkey in a love-hate relationship with his dreams. He is fascinated by them, but the disappointment is so painful that he is repelled by them as well.

The torture of the Hungry Ghost Realm is not so much the pain of not finding what he wants; rather it is the insatiable hunger itself which causes pain. Probably if the monkey

found large quantities of food, he would not touch it at all; or else he would eat everything and then desire more. This is because, fundamentally, the monkey is fascinated with *being* hungry rather than with *satisfying* his hunger. The quick frustration of his attempts to satisfy his hunger enables him to be hungry again. So the pain and hunger of the Preta Loka, as with the aggression of the Hell Realm and the pre-occupations of the other realms, provide the monkey with something exciting to occupy himself, something solid to relate to, something to make him feel secure that he exists as a real person. He is afraid to give up this security and entertainment, afraid to venture out into the unknown world of open space. He would rather stay in his familiar prison, no matter how painful and oppressive it might be.

However, as the monkey is repeatedly frustrated in his attempts to fulfill his fantasies, he begins to become somewhat resentful and at the same time resigned. He begins to give up the intensity of hunger and relax further into a set series of habitual responses to the world. He ignores other ways of dealing with life experiences, relies on the same set of responses, and in this way limits his world: a dog tries to smell everything with which it comes into contact; a cat takes no interest in television. This is the Animal Realm, the realm of stupidity. The monkey blinds himself to what is around him and refuses to explore new territory, clinging to familiar goals and familiar irritations. He is intoxicated with his safe, self-contained, familiar world and so fixes his attention on familiar goals and pursues them with unswerving and stubborn determination. Thus the Animal Realm is symbolized by the pig. A pig just eats whatever comes in front of its nose. It does not look right or left; it just goes right through, just

does it. It does not matter to the pig if it has to swim through a tremendous mud pool or face other obstacles; it just plows through and eats whatever appears in front of it.

But eventually the monkey begins to realize that he can pick and choose his pleasures and pains. He begins to become somewhat more intelligent, discriminating between pleasurable and painful experiences in an effort to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. This is the Human Realm, the realm of discriminating passion. Here the monkey stops to consider what it is that he is reaching for. He becomes more discriminating, considers alternatives, thinks more, and therefore hopes and fears more. This is the Human Realm, the realm of passion and intellect. The monkey becomes more intelligent. He does not simply grasp; he explores, feels textures, compares things. If he decides that he wants something, he tries to grasp it, draw it to him and possess it. For example, if the monkey were to want a beautiful silk material, he would go to different shops and feel the texture of their materials to see if any one of them was exactly what he wanted. When he came to the material which precisely fit his preconception, or the nearest thing to it, he would feel it and say, "Ah, that's right. Isn't it beautiful? I think it's worth buying." Then he would pay for it and take it home and show it to his friends and ask them to feel it and appreciate the texture of his beautiful material. In the Human Realm the monkey is always thinking about how to possess pleasurable things: "Maybe I should buy a teddy bear to take to bed—something lovable, cuddly, soft, warm and hairy."

But the monkey discovers that, although he is intelligent and can manipulate his world to achieve some pleasure, still he cannot hold on to pleasure nor can he always get what he

wants. He is plagued by illness, old age, death—by frustrations and problems of all kinds. Pain is the constant companion of his pleasures.

So he begins, quite logically, to deduce the possibility of heaven, the complete elimination of pain and achievement of pleasure. His version of heaven may be the acquisition of extreme wealth or power or fame—whatever it is he would like his world to be, and he becomes preoccupied with achievement and competition. This is the Asura Realm, the Realm of the Jealous Gods. The monkey dreams of ideal states that are superior to the pleasures and pains of the Human Realm and is always trying to achieve these states, always trying to be better than anyone else. In his constant struggle to achieve perfection of some sort, the monkey becomes obsessed with measuring his progress, with comparing himself to others. Through developing increased control of his thoughts and emotions and therefore greater concentration, he is able to manipulate his world more successfully than in the Human Realm. But his preoccupation with always being best, with always being master of a situation, makes him insecure and anxious. He must always struggle to control his territory, overcoming all threats to his achievements. He is always fighting for mastery of his world.

The ambition to gain victory and the fear of losing a battle provide a sense of being alive as well as cause irritation. The monkey constantly loses sight of his ultimate goal, but is still driven on by his ambition to be better. He is obsessed with competition and achievement. He seeks out pleasurable, appealing situations that seem beyond his reach and tries to draw them into his territory. When it is too difficult to achieve his goals, he may shy away from the struggle and condemn himself for not disciplining himself, for not working harder.

So the monkey is caught in a world of unfulfilled ideals, self-condemnation and fear of failure.

Eventually the monkey may achieve his goal—become a millionaire, leader of a country, famous artist. At first, upon achieving his goal, he will still feel somewhat insecure; but sooner or later he begins to realize that he has made it, that he is there, that he is in heaven. Then he begins to relax, to appreciate and dwell upon his achievements, shielding out undesirable things. It is an hypnotic-like state, natural concentration. This blissful and proud state is the Deva Loka or Realm of the Gods. Figuratively, the bodies of the gods are made out of light. They do not have to bother with earth-bound concerns. If they want to make love, just glancing and smiling at each other satisfies them. If they want to eat, they just direct their minds toward beautiful sights which feed them. It is the utopian world which human beings expect it to be. Everything happens easily, naturally, automatically. Whatever the monkey hears is musical, whatever he sees is colorful, whatever he feels is pleasant. He has achieved a kind of self-hypnosis, a natural state of concentration which blocks out of his mind everything he might find irritating or undesirable.

Then the monkey discovers that he can go beyond the sensual pleasures and beauties of the God Realm and enter into the *dhyana* or concentration states of the Realm of the Formless Gods, which is the ultimate refinement of the Six Realms. He realizes that he can achieve purely mental pleasure, the most subtle and durable of all, that he is able to maintain his sense of a solid self continuously by expanding the walls of his prison to seemingly include the whole cosmos, thereby conquering change and death. First he dwells upon the idea of limitless space. He watches limitless space; he is

here and limitless space is there and he watches it. He imposes his preconception on the world, creates limitless space, and feeds himself with this experience. Then the next stage is concentration upon the idea of limitless consciousness. Here one does not dwell on limitless space alone, but one also dwells upon the intelligence which perceives that limitless space as well. So ego watches limitless space and consciousness from its central headquarters. The empire of ego is completely extended, even the central authority cannot imagine how far its territory extends. Ego becomes a huge, gigantic beast.

Ego has extended itself so far that it begins to lose track of the boundary of its territory. Wherever it tries to define its boundary, it seems to exclude part of its territory. Finally, it concludes that there is no way of defining its boundaries. The size of its empire cannot be conceived or imagined. Since it includes everything, it cannot be defined as this or that. So the ego dwells on the idea of not this and not that, the idea that it cannot conceive or imagine itself. But finally even this state of mind is surpassed when the ego realizes that the idea that it is inconceivable and unimaginable is in itself a conception. So the ego dwells on the idea of *not* not this, and *not* not that. This idea of the impossibility of asserting anything is something which ego feeds on, takes pride in, identifies with and therefore uses to maintain its continuity. This is the highest level of concentration and achievement that confused, samsaric mind can attain.

The monkey has managed to reach the ultimate level of achievement; but he has not transcended the dualistic logic upon which achievement depends. The walls of the monkey's house are still solid, still have the quality of "other" in a subtle sense. The monkey may have achieved a temporary harmony and peace and bliss through a seeming union with

his projections; but the whole thing is subtly fixed, a closed world. He has become as solid as the walls, has achieved the state of Egohood. He is still preoccupied with securing and enhancing himself, still caught up in fixed ideas and concepts about the world and himself, still taking the fantasies of the fifth skandha seriously. Since his state of consciousness is based on concentration, on dwelling upon other, he must continually check and maintain his achievement. "What a relief to be here in the Realm of the Gods. I finally made it. I have really got it now. But wait a minute . . . Have I really made it? Ah, there it is. Yes, I've made it. *I* have made it." The monkey thinks that he has achieved nirvana, but actually he has achieved only a temporary state of Egohood.

Sooner or later the absorption wears out and the monkey begins to panic. He feels threatened, confused, vulnerable and plunges into the Realm of the Jealous Gods. But the anxiety and envy of the Realm of the Jealous Gods is overpowering and the monkey becomes preoccupied with figuring out what has gone wrong. So he returns to the Human Realm. But the Human Realm is very painful as well: the continual effort to figure out what is happening, what has gone wrong, just increases the pain and confusion. So the monkey escapes the hesitation and critical perspective of the human intellect and plunges into the animal realm where he just plods along, ignoring what is around him, playing deaf and dumb to messages that might challenge the security of following narrow, familiar ways. But messages from the environment break through and a hunger for something more develops. Nostalgia for the God Realm becomes very strong and the intensity of the struggle to go back to it increases. The monkey fantasizes enjoying the pleasures of the God Realm. But the satisfaction derived from the fantasy of fulfilling his hunger is brief and

he quickly finds himself hungry again. The hunger goes on and on, until finally he is overwhelmed by the frustration of his recurring hunger and plunges into a still more intense struggle to fulfill his desires. The monkey's aggression is so intense that the environment around him responds with equal aggression and an atmosphere of heat and claustrophobia develops. The monkey finds himself back in Hell. He has managed to make a full circle from hell to heaven and back again. This perpetual cycle of struggle, achievement, disillusionment and pain is the circle of samsara, the karmic chain reaction of dualistic fixation.

How can the monkey get out of this seemingly endless, self-contained cycle of imprisonment? It is in the Human Realm that the possibility of breaking the karmic chain or the circle of samsara, arises. The intellect of the Human Realm and the possibility of discriminating action allows room to question the whole process of struggle. There is a possibility for the monkey to question the obsession of relating to something, of getting something, to question the solidity of the worlds that he experiences. To do this, the monkey needs to develop panoramic awareness and transcendental knowledge. Panoramic awareness allows the monkey to see the space in which the struggle occurs so that he can begin to see its ironical and humorous quality. Instead of simply struggling, he begins to experience the struggle and see its futility. He laughs through the hallucinations. He discovers that when he does not fight the walls, they are not repulsive and hard but are actually warm, soft and penetrable. He finds that he does not have to leap from the five windows or break down the walls or even dwell upon them; he can step through them anywhere. That is why compassion or *karuna*

is described as "soft and noble heart." It is a communication process that is soft, open and warm.

The clarity and precision of transcendental knowledge allows the monkey to see the walls in a different way. He begins to realize that the world was never outside of himself, that it was his own dualistic attitude, the separation of "I" and "other," that created the problem. He begins to understand that he himself is making the walls solid, that he is imprisoning himself through his ambition. And so he begins to realize that to be free of his prison he must give up his ambition to escape and accept the walls as they are.

Q: What if you never really felt that you had to struggle—you have never reached the point of wanting to get out of the house? Perhaps you are a bit afraid of what is outside the walls, so you use them as protection.

A: Somehow, if you are able to establish friendly terms with the walls, then there are no more walls, as such. Much as you would like to have the walls for protection, the walls will not be there anymore. It is very paradoxical that, the more you dislike the wall, the stronger and thicker the wall becomes, and the more you make friends with the wall, the more the wall disappears.

Q: I wonder if pain and pleasure are on the same footing as this intellectual discrimination between good and bad or right and wrong. Is this discrimination due to a subjective attitude?

A: I think pleasure and pain are born in the same kind of background. Generally people regard pain as bad and pleasure as good, so much so that pleasure is regarded as joy and

spiritual bliss, and is connected with heaven, while pain is associated with hell. So if one is able to see the absurdity and irony of trying to achieve pleasure by rejecting pain, fearing extreme pain and so striving toward pleasure, it is all very funny. There is some lacking of a sense of humor in people's attitudes toward pleasure and pain.

Q: You stated earlier that we hallucinate the phenomenal world and want to break out of it. I understand the Buddhist teaching to say that the phenomenal world is simply the manifestation of emptiness, so what would there be to break out of?

A: The point is that in the perception of ego the phenomenal world is very real, overwhelming, solid. It may in fact be hallucinatory, but as far as the monkey is concerned the hallucination is quite real and solid. From his confused point of view even thought becomes very solid and tangible. It is not good enough to say that these hallucinations do not exist because form is emptiness and emptiness is form. Try telling that to a neurotic monkey. As far as he is concerned, form exists as solid and heavy form. It is real to him because he is so obsessed with it that he does not allow any space to see otherwise. He is too busy continuously trying to reinforce his own existence. He never allows a gap. Thus there is no room for inspiration, no room to see other aspects, different angles of the situation. From the monkey's point of view the confusion is *real*. When you have a nightmare, at that moment it is real, terribly frightening. On the other hand, when you look back at the experience, it seems merely to have been a dream. You cannot use two different kinds of logic simultaneously. You have to see the confused aspect completely in order to see through it, to see the absurdity of it.